

Summary of the National Roundtable on Polar Bears

Overview

The National Roundtable on Polar Bears was held on January 16, 2009, in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Participants of the Roundtable included territories and provinces, the wildlife management boards, the Inuit, First Nations, Aboriginal groups, scientists and others who have a management or conservation role to protect Canada's approximately 15,500 polar bears. The purpose of the Polar Bear Roundtable was to increase awareness of the many conservation actions underway by various parties, to hear views regarding priority areas for action from a broad cross-section of knowledgeable opinion leaders and to set the scene for consultations related to listing the polar bear under the federal *Species at Risk Act*.

Key Discussion Points

Although the Roundtable was intended as a forum for presenting differing points of view, there were several points of agreement. These points include the fact that the polar bear is of great cultural significance to Canadians, and that the need for strong conservation measures to ensure the health and vitality of the species is not just a domestic matter, but an international concern. There was also agreement in the increased encounters between polar bears and humans, and the concern that such encounters cause to both humans and bears. The need to better integrate science and Inuit traditional knowledge in the management of polar bears was also a shared view amongst participants. As stewards of the environment, participants agreed that cooperation and collaboration are required in order to enhance existing strengths.

Participants also agreed that climate change was the most significant long-term threat to polar bears and that there is less sea ice in the Arctic. Sea ice is the primary habitat of polar bears who use it to move, hunt, mate and sometimes den. Sea ice can be classified as annual ice (which melts and forms again every year) and multi-year ice (which does not melt completely each year). Since annual ice is key habitat for ringed seals, the main prey item for polar bears, it is also critically important habitat for polar bears. In places like the Beaufort Sea, multi-year ice is also important as it provides both maternity denning habitat for some bears, and summer refugia to bears as the sea ice retreats northwards. As such, both annual and multi-year ice are critical for polar bears. Research gaps remain, but it is clear that multi-year ice is shrinking and thinning in the Arctic. Although annual ice will continue to form, a longer ice-free season is detrimental to polar bears.

Habitat loss due to industrial activity was also recognized as a threat to polar bears.

In Canada, the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) assessed the polar bear as a species of special concern. This assessment incorporates both science and Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge, including Inuit Qaujimagatuqngit (IQ). Although COSEWIC assessed Canadian polar bears as a single population, they are managed by subpopulation where trends in population size vary by subpopulation. As such, COSEWIC has identified likely decline in four of Canada's 13 subpopulations: declines in the Western Hudson Bay and

Southern Beaufort Sea subpopulations are attributed largely to climate change whereas declines of the Baffin Bay and Kane Basin subpopulations are attributed largely to overharvesting.

Based on IUCN and recent government data, the World Wildlife Fund provided evidence indicating that six Canadian subpopulations were in decline, and a further two were depleted.

However, members of several Inuit organizations noted that they are seeing more bears than in the past and therefore question whether populations are in decline. They also noted that polar bear research is quite recent and that gaps exist in the science. The inclusion of Inuit Qaujimagatuqngit (IQ) or Inuit traditional knowledge in the process would be a way to provide for a longer term perspective. For example, Inuit indicated that bears may move between subpopulation boundaries, and recent scientific evidence suggests the Canadian population of polar bears should be split into five designatable units for polar bear conservation, rather than the 13 management units currently in place.

The threat of overharvesting was a discussion point at the Roundtable. Most of the polar bear hunting in Canada is managed according to an enforced quota system, which includes all human-caused mortality of polar bears such as subsistence hunting, sport hunting, and defense kills. Inuit from Nunavut have indicated that they have strong management practices in place which include an enforceable quota system and therefore do not believe that they overharvest polar bears. The Baffin Bay and Kane Basin subpopulations of polar bears are shared with Greenland. Some participants suggested the need for more coordinated and consistent management with jurisdictions such as Quebec and Greenland since quota systems are not set and managed the same in all regions. In the western Arctic, the Inuvialuit and the Inupiat already have a user-to-user agreement in place and have a long history of cooperation. A coordinated effort through the establishment of a Memorandum of Understanding with Greenland is one way to manage the shared subpopulations. The COSEWIC report notes that reductions of the harvest quota in the depleted management units of M'Clintock Channel and Viscount Melville Sound appears to have resulted in increased polar bear populations.

The value of the sport hunt to conservation of polar bears was also raised. Not only does sport hunting bring much needed capital into the community, it is also a valuable conservation tool. Once a polar bear tag is allocated for a sport hunt, it cannot be re-allocated if the sport hunter is unsuccessful. In this way, sport hunting acts as a conservation measure for polar bears. However, different jurisdictions have different approaches to polar bear management. For example, Manitoba limited the hunting of polar bears to residents of the Hudson Bay coastal area in 1949. In order to manage the increased encounters between humans and polar bears, Manitoba runs the Polar Bear Alert Program. This program serves to protect human life and property, prevent the unnecessary harassment and killing of polar bears and to prevent polar bears from developing problem behaviour by using scare tactics and removes attractants such as garbage to deter polar bears from coming into towns. The town of Churchill, MB, has also built a multi-million dollar tourist industry around polar bear viewing, attracting thousands of visitors each year.

Conclusions and Next Steps

In his closing remarks, Minister Prentice assured participants that the input provided, in addition to upcoming extensive consultations, would be used to inform his recommendation on the potential listing of the polar bear as a species of special concern under the *Species at Risk Act*.

Minister Prentice also identified the need to accelerate engagement and discussions with Greenland on the conservation of the shared subpopulations and to better communicate Canada's management regimes. He also noted the need to better integrate science and Inuit traditional knowledge, and identified priorities for additional scientific research.

While the roundtable highlighted that there is much work to be done to conserve polar bears, it also established the need for collaboration at the regional, national and international level, amongst government, scientists, Inuit and non-governmental organizations. The establishment of a distinguished working group was identified as a possible forum for future collaboration. This group could provide advice on matters such as: collaboration on conservation practices across jurisdictional boundaries, improving communications, and input to an action plan that could include cooperative agreements under the federal *Species at Risk Act*.

The Polar Bear Roundtable was a constructive and positive step in sharing knowledge, establishing a proactive dialogue and working together for the conservation and management of this iconic species.